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ABSTRACT

The developing relationship of linguistics to matters of current social concern, especially as it relates to the study of minority groups, is discussed. Problems in studying Negro/white speech differences are related to: the researcher vs. the researched; the unfulfilled promises of research and the dangers of knowing; the misassessing of facts by scholars; a partial or incomplete knowledge of facts; and an inadequate research design for ascertaining these facts. (DB)

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SOME PROBLEMS IN STUDYING NEGRO/WHITE SPEECH DIFFERENCES

Roger W. Shuy

In a recent caricature of the relationship of anthropologists to the American Indians whom they study, Vine Deloria, Jr. in his new book *Custer Died for Your Sins*, rather humorously but accurately portrays the annual, summer ritual of the scholarly community to the golden southwest.[1] Exactly when the ritual began remains a mystery but Deloria feels that Indians are certain that all ancient societies of the Near East had anthropologists at one time because those societies are all now defunct. Of greater concern, however, is the author's conviction that the essential mes-

[1] Vine Deloria, Jr. "Custer Died for Your Sins," **Playboy**, (August, 1969), pp. 131-132, 172-175.

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sage of all these observations, reports, and books on the American Indian says the same thing year after year and the say it in a mildly offensive, sloganeering way. ". . . Indians are a folk people, whites are an urban people, . . . Indians are between two cultures, Indians are bicultural, Indians have lost their identity, . . . Indians are warriors." (p. 132).

It is not our purpose here to pursue further Deloria's thesis about his fellow American Indians, but rather to use it as a point of departure for examining our own approaches to the study of minority groups in the field of language, social dialects in particular.

The Unfulfilled Promises of Research

Of course it is hardly appropriate for linguists to look down on other disciplines in matters which involve the study of people. If we have not been criticized adequately, it is probably only from our lack of activity so far. For example, the serious study of the speech of economically and educationally disadvantaged Negroes has only just begun and has hardly caused a stir in a world of race-relations which has not yet fully conceived of language as part of the battle ground.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the developing relationship of linguistics to matters of current social concern, especially as it relates to the study of minority groups. The September (1969) annual meetings of the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Sociological Association (ASA) and the American Political Science Association (APSA) may provide considerable weighty warning about the road ahead in the study of social dialects in our country. Just as Deloria scored anthropologists for their alleged compilation of useless knowledge for knowledge's sake and for their heady but empty determination to preserve their own species, so current research practices of the disciplines of psychology, sociology and political science have been uncerimoniously attacked by their own membership with statements like the following one made by Robert L. Green, co-chairman of the Association of Black Psychologists: who observes that the black community has served as a research colony for white psychologists and white sociologists.[2] Likewise, in his presidential address at the ASPA, David Easten proclaimed: "A new revolution is underway in political science. Its battle cries are *relevance* and *action*. Its objects of criticism are the discipline, the professions and the universities." [3]

From the unrest apparent in the disciplines of psychology, sociology and political science, and from certain feedback from the as yet limited research done by linguists in minority group speech, two problems have emerged for which solutions must be immediately devised:

1. Should the speech of minority groups be studied at all?
2. If justification is found for studying such speech, what should be required of it?

The most ardent detractors from the study of social dialects seem divided on both issues. There may be some, for example, who argue that it is pointless to do research on non-standard speech. They may regard it as unattractive and of little value and argue that researchers might better spend their time on studying more useful things. But such an argument can be rejected from the perspective of almost any discipline. Non-standard speech is interesting psychologically, anthropologically, historically, linguistically and, most certainly, pedagogically. More important, these and other disciplines can provide helpful assistance to speakers of such dialects if the

[2] Robert L. Green, in Washington Evening Star (September 3, 1969), p. A 22.
[3] Newsweek, September 15, 1969. p. 42.

researchers can free themselves from their enchantment with basic research and move along to practical matters as well. The latter may be the most convincing of all, since it is virtually impossible to plot an educational strategy by knowing only the desired end results. One must certainly also know the learner's beginning points.

The Researcher vs. the Researched

In recent months we have heard further criticism of the study of nonstandard speech. These cries are made from quite defensible grounds and with convincing logic. They go something like this: "Why single us out for research? Why not study some other groups of people?" Unfortunately, researchers were not always ready with acceptable answers to these questions and, no matter how well motivated they really were, their responses easily could be taken as, at best, patronizing and, at worst, discriminatory. Thus unthinking answers such as "We are studying you because you have such a great problem" or "We are studying you because you are so interesting from the view point of my discipline" lead only to what Desmond Morris might call "The Human Zoo syndrome." Subjects may be thought of as freaks or, at least, as peculiar. Even our scholarly use of the designators, *informants*, *subjects*, *populations*, etc. smack of a cold impersonality with which no lay reader could be expected to sympathize. Deloria's complaint undoubtedly will be answered, to some extent, by anthropologists who are probably not as badly motivated as he makes them out to be but who are also not as conscionable as they themselves think they are. Deloria rightly attacks the useless knowledge for knowledge's sake and concludes, "why should tribes have to compete with scholars for funds when their scholarly productions are so useless and irrelevant to life?" (p. 174)

The Danger of Knowing

This attack, namely, that researchers stop far short of providing information which can be translated into a useful program to help alleviate the problem they are supposedly studying, is a serious one. In fact, Deloria observes, the basic research data, unless seen in light of concrete action, can contribute seriously to the demise of a minority group. Thus the anthropologist's explanation that the Indian's dilemma at being between two worlds leads him to excuse his excessive drinking on the grounds that he does it because he is in a dilemma between two worlds. Or, in another setting, Daniel P. Moynihan's observation that ghetto Negro families suffer from being female dominated can provide the ghetto Negro male all the excuse he needs to shirk his family responsibilities. The danger, of course, is not in these facts by themselves (assuming that they are accurate), but in seeing these facts in isolation rather than as part of a larger continuum.

For those of you who have been wondering whether or not I was ever going to get to the topic implied by the title of this paper, let me now begin to put you at ease. In order to study differences between the speech used by any two groups of people, it is necessary to have done considerable thinking about what the knowledge of this comparison will do for the people being studied as well as for the fields of scholarship involved. The people whose speech is being studied, however, care very little about how well linguists can solve linguistic problems involving language change, ordered rules or the discovery of underlying forms. They care not a whit about how well language features can be used as a measure of social stratification or to determine historical influences, linguistic assimilation or variable rules. Any research project which proposes to use minority group subjects today must fully realize that the days of the responsive informant are growing numbered. He wants to know why we are doing what we are doing and what it all leads to. The linguist involved in such projects

can no longer aim only at a scholarly journal to his research, even though his professional status argues that he should. He must worry, at every stage of his research, about the ultimate end product. In short, the modern situation argues for research projects with broad scopes, not narrow ones, and for practical outcomes, not merely theoretical ones.

Easy-Believism

Recent times have witnessed a number of educational easy-believisms all which have come short of the glory of success. Recent reports of the failure of Title I funds to accomplish what they set out to do have pointed out, much to our embarrassment, that benefit to the school's problems does not accrue from merely making large amounts of money available. In fact, a recent report by economists at the First National City Bank of N. Y. showed that there is little correlation between improvement in reading skills in black schools and the amount of money poured into these classrooms.[4] The next easy-believism is likely to be that all we really need is a lot more teachers or tutors, then children will learn to read and write. It has been suggested, in fact, that a cadre of lay people can be used effectively to teach literacy in this country (oddly enough, it has never been suggested, to my knowledge, that a large cadre of lay people be formed to aid in the problems of dentistry or law). Of course money is useful and no program can operate without willing and altruistic people but this line of thinking neglects a far more major problem—"What is the content of the subject to be taught?" What this suggests is that the exact reverse of the relevance principle so aptly advocated by Deloria may also lead to meaninglessness to the minority group. To a certain extent, this principle underlies the Regional Educational Laboratory movement in this country. For several years now such laboratories have concentrated heavily on converting vast amounts of basic research into viable classroom practices. The results of their efforts have not been earthshaking, despite every good intention and, in some cases, because of it. The dangers of picking up another man's research and running with it should be immediately apparent without documentation, since the literature is now growing on the subject. But oral language materials for secondary students should offer a plethora of examples. The New York City Board of Education, for example, used the work of William Labov and Beryl Bailey as a base for constructing the NCTE's publication *Non-Standard Dialects.* In doing so, it managed to misunderstand a great deal of what these excellent scholars have written. Likewise, one of the better regional educational laboratories has been using oral language materials originally written for Spanish speakers with Southern Negro children. Yet the ludicrousness of teaching black children such things as the aspiration of their word initial voiceless stops should be apparent to anyone. What I am saying is that if researchers can be scored for not carrying their research to practical ends, likewise the practical people can be criticized for not doing the research. Both can be well meaning and, to a limited extent, accurate, but neither sees the whole picture that is becoming an absolute requirement in our times. And we have been led to this not by the insights of our own disciplines, not by a sudden rediscovery of Francis Bacon's Renaissance Man who argued that "all knowledge should be our province." Instead we have been led to it by the very people we are studying. They are telling us, "Don't study me or my speech if it won't help me. I've got enough problems as it is and I don't have time for that kind of game-playing. If it will help me, show me how." But even then there is no guarantee that he will cooperate with us. And we

[4] Karl E. Meyer, "Money as School Cure-All Questioned," **The Washington Post,** Tuesday, November 25, 1969, p. A6.

can't blame him if he refuses. Our track record is far from clear. The various disciplines that have been studying Negro speech in this country have said enough damaging things already to produce an uncrossable gulf. Early childhood educators have told him that he is non-verbal, that he has defective hearing and that his language signals cognitive deficit. Speech people have told him that he is deficient and suffering from a kind of pathological weakness. English teachers have dismissed him as inarticulate and ignorant of the most fundamental aspects of grammar and pronunciation. Reading teachers have considered him illiterate. Psychologists have observed that he deviates from the prescribed norm. Linguists have described his speech in order to observe sound change, historical origins and underlying grammatical forms. Where do we begin to repair the damage? Or was there any point to studying his speech in the first place?

Inadequate Research Design

We have briefly discussed the problems of the researcher vs. the researched, the unfulfilled promises of research and the dangers of knowing. Other problems in studying Negro-white speech differences stem from the misassessing of facts by scholars, a partial or incomplete knowledge of the facts, and an inadequate research design for ascertaining these facts. It is the latter problem to which I wish to address myself in the remainder of this paper.

Historically it has been difficult for linguists to observe the speech differences between the races because their tools for measuring social class were imperfect, often leading their results astray. That is, Negro-white differences tend to be minimized in the upper middle classes but become increasingly evident as one moves down the social scale. Evidence of this minimizing can be clearly observed from the C.A.L. research, *Sociolinguistic Factors in Speech Identification* when, from stimuli containing as little as 20 to 30 seconds of continuous tape recorded speech, listeners could accurately identify the race of the speaker in all but the upper middle class stimuli.[5] The taped speech of upper middle class Negroes was identified by race accurately only 17.3% of the time by Negro listeners and only 8.2% of the time by white listeners. Listeners judged the racial identity of the taped voices of all other classes, however, with an overall accuracy of approximately 95%. This sort of information seems to make it quite clear that researchers must be very careful to get a rather complete spectrum of social class representation of both races when studying Negro-White speech differences. This is, of course, easier said than done. The relatively unbiased random sample which the Detroit Dialect Study carried out in that city in 1966 turned up a population which showed that only 15% of all Negroes are found in the upper half of the social status spectrum in contrast to 40% of the white population which is found in that category. Likewise, at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, it is often difficult to find whites who are as poor as the poorest Negroes, especially in the South.

One thing we are warned against, by facts such as these, is that it is dangerous to say anything about Negro-white speech differences on the basis of language data evidence from only the middle class Negroes. Equally dangerous, however, is the opposite of this situation. The early research of the Urban Language Study was carried out on a relatively small population in Washington, D. C. Considerable effort was made to avoid the bias of dialectologists in their wide-meshed studies. Rather early in the research, however, an obvious question arose: Just how representative is the speech

[5] Shuy, Roger W., Joan C. Baratz and Walter A. Wolfram, Sociolinguistic Factors in Speech Identification, NIMH Project No MH 15048-01, Final Report.

of one city block in Washington? After asking ourselves these questions, we developed a somewhat broader base using two major cities, Detroit and Washington, with representatives from all social classes, ages and races. Since it had become increasingly difficult to describe a feature as characteristically lower class, adult or Negro without knowing considerably more about the speech of contiguous social groups, it was necessary to analyze the speech of these groups as well.

Recent sociolinguistic research which highlights Negro-white speech differences has paid considerable attention to representative sampling and selectional bias. In Wolfram's recent study of Detroit Negro speech he selected 48 informants from the randomly selected corpus of the Detroit Dialect Study.[6] The informants were evenly distributed among four social classes, three age groups and both sexes. His research design illustrates a growing awareness among linguists that it is unfair to talk about Negro speech, Black English (or whatever other term is used) without observing such speech in a wide range of social categories. Of course, there are other ranges to be covered as well, including the social context of the speaking and the style of speech which is being observed. A true picture of Negro-white speech differences will have to account for all of these situations.

But even a well designed study such as Wolfram's examines only part of the problem. In an urban Northern community such as Detroit, many regional features appear to have been transformed into ethnic or social status markers. A study of Negro-white speech differences in such a community may be accurate for that community but may say little about the same situation elsewhere, especially in the South. It would seem that comparable quantitative studies of Negro-white speech differences must also be done in the deep South. Such a study should build on the differences already noted in the North (especially in Detroit, Chicago, Washington, D. C. and New York). As a step in this process, linguists at C.A.L. have begun extracting speech data obtained from fifty lower socio-economic children from Lexington, Mississippi (a small, rural, cotton raising area some forty miles north of Jackson). The informants are all six to eight year old residents of that area. Half are Negro and half are white. We selected this age group to begin our study since it represents a period when children are generally past the developmental stage but not yet at the age when the social consequences of their language is in high gear. Also, since it has been suggested that among children certain creole-like features are more apt to be found than at any other age, it seemed useful to start with this age group.

Although the analyses of these Mississippi data are still in the early stages it is already possible to see certain patterns recurring. The polarity of position perhaps first stated by Kurath in 1949, that the speech of uneducated Southern Negroes differs little from illiterate Southern whites, with that of Bailey who states that the non-standard speech of American Negroes exhibits a different deep structure, having creole grammatical origins, is at the focus of the dilemma from the linguist's point of view. But the people of Mississippi will have to have a better reason for being studied. That is, the linguist will have to be able to indicate that by studying the speech of Lexington, we will contribute, in some way, to their lives. As it turns out, this study had such a reason. The speech features were studied in relationship to the curriculum and materials which were in use at that time. The end product will be, on the one hand, a description of certain stigmatized features of the speech of both Negro and white

[6] Wolfram, Walter A. **A Sociolinguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech**, Washington: CAL, 1969.

children in Lexington. On the other hand, the end product will also include a set of recommendations to the school concerning whether or not the curriculum and materials address themselves to the right questions and if they are relevant, how they might be improved.

This kind of study may inch linguists who are interested in Negro-white speech differences a little closer to satisfying the pressing questions of relevance and action. But it is going to require a different breed of linguist than is being turned out by most of our universities today. We have lived to see the consequences of fragmentized research strategies. It has been proved that, in matters of applied linguistics, we can not rely on the linguist to do just the basic research, then pass the ball to the educator for pedagogical purposes. It has been equally disastrous for educators to pretend to be able to do the basic linguistic research upon which classroom applications can be made. Neither of these approaches has been done well and it seems unlikely that they ever will. Instead what seems to be a more useful path is for linguists to abandon their insecurity about being tainted by matters of applied linguistics. Many prominent linguists are speaking out on matters of politics and social concerns today. It seems ludicrous that such speaking out has been largely accomplished *outside* their disciplinary competence, not from within. If we are really serious about social and educational problems in our country we should not be above working on them from the view and framework of our discipline. In short, I am arguing that applied linguistics be restored to legitimacy among linguists who, instead of scorning it, should contribute their knowledge. If linguistics has nothing to say about matters of current social, political or educational concern, we should ask ourselves whether or not our discipline is little more than academic game.

The purpose of this paper has been to point out some of the problems involved in studying Negro/white speech differences in our country. Some of our problems stem from inadequacies in research design. Some of the problems stem of our own political, social, disciplinary insensitivities. The times will no longer permit us this sort of barbarism. Rather than despair, however, we should be thankful that those whom we have treated as subjects for research are forcing us toward new relevance. The burden is now upon linguistics to broaden its narrow focus—or to get out of the business entirely.